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Tetanus Shot Should Be Among Rites of Spring

By Melanie Reynolds

Rites of spring:

1. Kick off shoes and socks and run barefoot through new grass.
2. Step on rusty nail.
3. Head to doctor for tetanus shot or booster.

Does that sound familiar?

Spring is here today, bringing with it an increased risk of tetanus, a bacterial disease that affects the central nervous system and is often fatal. The good news (besides the arrival of spring) is that tetanus is entirely preventable.

Tetanus bacteria are all around us, including in soil and in the saliva and feces of many household and farm animals. You may already know that a puncture wound can cause a tetanus infection, but the bacteria also can invade your body through a tiny pinprick, an animal scratch, splinters, bug bites, and even sunburns that break the skin. Even gardeners run a risk if they work in contaminated soil without gloves.

Tetanus bacteria produce a poison that spreads through the body, causing painful muscle contractions. Tetanus is often called “lockjaw” because it can stiffen neck and jaw muscles, making it hard to open the mouth or swallow. It can cause breathing problems, convulsions strong enough to break bones, and, if left untreated, death. Fortunately, the disease doesn’t spread from person to person.

The best defense against tetanus – for both kids and adults – is vaccination. Children should get a tetanus vaccine as part of recommended childhood immunizations. Teens and adults should get a booster every 10 years.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that children get five doses of tetanus vaccine beginning at two months of age. It’s often combined with other vaccines, such as those for diphtheria and pertussis, or whooping cough.

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is to protect and improve the health of all county residents.*

If you don't have health insurance or if your insurance doesn't cover vaccines, the Vaccines for Children program, administered here at the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, may be able to help. It covers the cost of vaccine for uninsured and underinsured children under age 19. There may be a fee to cover the cost of administering the shot. You can contact us at 443-2584 or talk to your health-care provider to learn more.

Teens and adults who never had the initial childhood tetanus vaccinations should get a series of three shots. Otherwise, they should get a tetanus booster at least every 10 years.

The health department offers tetanus immunizations during its walk-in clinics Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Ave. No appointment is needed and all forms of insurance can be billed.

Health officials currently recommend that all adults get a Tdap (which protects against tetanus and pertussis) as soon as possible if they haven't had one. Expectant mothers can get it during the third trimester of pregnancy, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This helps to protect the newborn, too.

Only about 40-60 people get tetanus in the United States each year, down from 500-600 cases in the late 1940s, when the vaccine became routinely offered to children. One of the main reasons people die of tetanus today is because they didn't realize their vaccination had expired.

If you step on a nail or suffer a wound that is deep and dirty, rinse the wound thoroughly with plain tap water and seek treatment immediately. You shouldn't use soap or antiseptic on a deep wound. Your health care provider may suggest a booster dose of tetanus if you weren't vaccinated within the past five years, just to make sure you're adequately protected.

Spring, with its promise of long days spent working and playing outdoors, is a logical time to make sure you and your children are fully immunized against tetanus. Why not put this at the top of your list of "rites of spring?"

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